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SMOKE

IN THIS ISSUE

Seelig's Confession

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SMOKE

The Confession of the Holy *Johann Friedrich Selig*, One Time Magister of the Alchemical Community (Known Vulgarly as *The Woman in the Wilderness*), to His Dear Friend William Levering, of the Sect Called *Friends*, on Saint John's Eve, June 24, 1744, at Germanopel, Pennsylvania, in America.

MIDNIGHT. Still the bonfires fringe the Ridge,
breaking the sky-line; as though at last
the earthy heart had burst with hidden flame,
scorching the black and starry reptiles, forth-
coiling from out the dark fire-world of the brain
where for everlasting they have bred.
O light in blackness!
— Fifty lengthy years.
Just fifty years ago tonight we came . . . .

They have thrown the bones, the flowers, the pine-branches
into the blazing piles; they have recited
the incantations against pestilence.
The fires die out; they roll the embers down
in imitation of the declining sun;
now they are burying sigils in the ashes.
O human happiness! Why should we doubt?

Not as they think are joy and health procured;
yet in these means they find true joy and health.
For all is mind, and in the mind Christ comes.

O blessed Böhme! So I read you now.
Vain was our star-watch; well was it abandoned.
Vainly we searched the skies all night for Christ,
sweeping horizon, azimuth, meridian,
with our poor telescope, to spy the splendid
coming of the Lamb among the constellated
beasts. The Lamb, outdazzling the moon! We thought
to track the supersensual in the sensible,
mistaking macrocosm for microcosm,—
a hope too simple to be blasphemy!
— Yet who dare say that into fallen Nature
He shall not cleave? — Does He not heal the sick
today, through prayer and consecrated touch?
Heart of the Universe! His rays illumine
macrocosm and microcosm together,
although the mystery of His promise is still mystery.
And who can say what was the apparition
the seventh anniversary of our landing —
forty-three years ago this very night —
which passed like an angel through these ancient pines?

Dear Levering, dearest friend man ever had,
the outward Second Coming is not yet.
Pastorius, leader in the Wilderness,
abandons vines and bees to trouble Falkner,
that other saint escaped from Jezebel.
Both of them feed the dragon with their pride.
Some that abandoned all for our researches
have wandered away and taken wives for themselves.
I could not hold them; neither can Brother Conrad.
Kelpius died too soon; his cave is empty.

The outward Second Coming is not yet;
still, we both know that Christ has come to us,
that we both live continually by His side,
and that His hand helps in all work we do.
I do not teach a child — even bind a book —

but that His eye, His heart, His voice is with me.
Salvation is this consciousness of Christ.
Why should you quarrel, then, with ceremony,
the private rituals of acknowledgment,
the public rituals of proclamation?

The End is nowhere, the Way everywhere.
The laziest foot-path manifests the Way.
Our paths fell side by side, yet are not one.
Yours, Penn and Fox; mine, Paracelsus and Böhme.
You have not yet perceived the truth in Böhme.
Dear friend, read him again; and to persuade you,
let me reveal what I have never told:
I have not many months left to me now,
nor have I lived, if there be none to inherit.

Once, in the dusk, a vast moon lifted itself
clear of the young tangle of summer branches,
and I, wholly alone, wandered to meet it.

Below the hill was a pond that the moon filled;
the entire surface was scaled with ripples of light,
and I said: "I will go dive into the moon-fire.
"I will float upheld in flaming tongues of pure light.
"It is hot: I will wash myself clean of the day's dust
"in dew-cold water saturated with moon."

The frogs were singing like sleighbells as I stripped;
I stood naked to the touch of the breeze.
But the pool was dark before me:
only a small moon lay trembling on the surface.

And I laughed: "If the moon, near to, is no larger than that,
"as I plunge, I will catch it in my mouth and swallow it."

Yet, when I stepped out into the water,
the moon bounded madly between my knees.
I plunged;
and lo! the whole surface of the pond
burst to a white dazzle about my eyes;
then from blackness

lips of water touched my lips
but leapt away at once, back into black.

(Creatures other than we see inhabit the world.)

Once, in the peace of the spring forest, I lay down
and parted the needles to inhale the loam-perfume.
"Mother of flesh!" I murmured, "hear my thought!
"If my thought is your thought, we understand one another;"
and resting my cheek on the rich earth
I felt
her tremble with her breathing; I heard deep down
the throb of her fire-heart, pumping
her blood of melted metals through her granite veins.
— Suddenly
leaping from Indian-pipe to bracken tip,
a tiny spirit, bright as a sunlit tulip,
vanished.

Perhaps a feathery Indian fairy — New-World sylph —
I cannot tell: just as my startled
eyes turned full upon it, it vanished.
Perhaps a mote, soaring within the eyeball,
miraculously blossomed into form.

The trees had been almost alive.

We cannot create, but we can give form to spirit,
give form, even will, weaving them out of our brain,
drawing the thread from the belly of the brain.

Once, on a night of the absence of the moon,
I felt a presence near me, begging a soul.
Across the door I could see darkness gathering together,
vaguely blotting out the dim autumnal star-drift.
I rose from my stool
a bride of air
almost perceptible
awaited touch —
intense thought pierced the dimensions.
My hands moulded a skull, my fingers

combed long tresses, my lips created
brow, cheek, lips — almost a perfect head —

when my will withered; the cold mouth withered away.
I started, awake, to feel only
darkness pouring through my arms.

Yet once again, an ancient night of storm:
a pack of winds snapped and snarled at my chimney;
upon the roof of my cabin drove the pale-hooved thunder,
while snow drifted across the frozen Wissahickon.

I fixed my eyes on a hot fire.
The log was consumed; a rounded pile of coals
shone pure, a white-hot sun upon my hearth.

Then I went forth, but how I do not know,
in a strong spiral above the cold and the clouds,
past stars more intricate than the magnified snow-flake,
floating naiad-flowers, breasting the current of night,
— upward, until I perceived what I cannot say:
for scarcely had I glimpsed the ineffable
when my earthly eyes slowly were opened again,
and saw the sun on my hearth nearly set
in purple films below dense clouds of ashes.

Thus had I walked the starry paths of the elements
which govern the Dark World, to the very end;
thus in ignorance had I lived the seasons
until I saw, behind them, meaningless years.
Yet, though the smiles of these masks were not for me,
voices began to repeat the words of power.
I had not spoken in vain. Voices behind
reiterated antique incantations;
and I knew that if they and I but spoke together
those words, all power in the world was mine.

What dost thou here? Not to be prince of the air,
though the wind rend the mountains and break in pieces the rock.
What dost thou here? Though an earthquake split the land

even down to the heart of our bodies' mother,
though fire consume the world, as was prophesied,
what dost thou here? these forty days and nights?
This Ridge is the mount of God; this ridge — this ridge is Horeb.

What had I seen, with my eyes fixed on that fire?
I saw the dark Abyss of the Father open,
and in that dark, blossom a flower of light
out of the Father's heart: it was the Son —
the Word blooming, opening into Paradise;
and I saw Eternal Nature, pure as crystal
intricate with glory; she took the form
of a pure virgin, the pure Wisdom of God,
Sophia,
bride of the Lamb,
Jerusalem, the city of saints,
built of all precious stones
blazing innumerable colors
with Light behind.
And then the colors faded, for she was fallen.
The serpent reared his head against her;
she fled.
All this I saw; whether in or out of the body,
I cannot tell. I woke in my cabin,
trembling; my eyes opened on the flickering hearth.

Such was the clang, the vision, the reward.
I had beheld
the bride I won by renouncing carnal marriage,—
unveiled, my bride.
Something of this all men see,— something.
Pastorius caught his bees once humming hymns.
You yourself cannot face the rising moon
but something in Fallen Nature burns away
and you perceive her real form of crystal.
Since this is so, why doubt the deeper vision?
Why scorn the practice of the burnished cross?
But there is a mystery that I must not tell you.
Read Böhme's life, and guess it for yourself.

How can you doubt? The world is still imperfect;

the rites of our community still doubtful.
Yet what transfigurations and translations,
ecstasies, apparitions, prophesyings,
readings of minds, and fastings of the body,
what paradisical representations
by voices, melodies!
—The proof, you say?
Doubter! Did not Magister Matthai
once see for an anxious wife the sailor husband
drinking his coffee in a London tavern?
Did not the husband, when he returned at last,
recognise Matthai as the very stranger
who spoke to him in London at that tavern?
Such marvels has the Magia performed
when it illuminated outward Reason . . . .

Our paths are two, though they lie side by side.
Either to walk the other's path were misstep.
You hear, and do not hear. Good night, dear friend . . . .

The Dragon still lies locked around
The Woman in the Wilderness.
Dense night has come; she has not found
The path whereby to save and bless
Her son as yet unborn, uncrowned.

The moon and sun — two lashless eyes —
Watch without lapse the mystery
Lost in the forest, where she lies
Helpless, shuddering to see
The starry scales across the skies.

Thirst-enthroated and hunger-jawed,
He waits, intolerably fasting
Through period on period
Everlasting — everlasting —
To eat the flesh and drink the blood,—

Not guessing (so is he accursed)
Of that celestial sacrament,

That other flesh and blood, dispersed
Before the world's establishment,
To end all hunger and all thirst.

There is no way for her to flee:
The loathly reptile locks her in.
Her child!— the god that was to be!
She feels her travailing begin
And labors in lone agony.

But now those dreary years are sped.
— O blazing cross to whom I kneel,
Aching with light as yet unshed,
Descend! and with your white-hot heel
Transfix, break the serpent head!

I kneel — my tear-scorched eyes upturning —
Descend!— and split the jaws apart!—
Open the way to my one yearning,
That I may see upon thy heart
The huge red rose unfolding, burning.

Only you and I alone . . . .
The dragon of the world decays . . . .
I rise through shaking zone on zone,
Deeper and deeper, . . . till I gaze
Reborn, upon the very Throne . . . .

Historical Note

IN 1683, just two hundred and fifty years ago, a group of Palatinate Pietists, headed by Francis Daniel Pastorius, founded Germantown, Pennsylvania, the first permanent German settlement in the United States. In 1694, a mysterious group of hermetic philosophers joined them, settling in cabins and caves on the Wissahickon gorge. Behmenistic theosophers and mystical alchemists they certainly were; and as one of their manuscripts (still preserved) is an early version of the SECRET SYMBOLS OF THE ROSICRUCIANS (*Altona*, 1785–8), the tradition that they were Rosicrucians is probably justified. It may be pertinent to point out that Melchior Adam Pastorius, father of the immigrant, was author of a lost DE ALCHIMIA, and a friend of that Johannes Valentinus Andreae who wrote the famous Rosicrucian CHEMICAL MARRIAGE; and that the Pastorius arms, as those of author, are prefixed to the alchemical BOOK OF LAMBSPRING.

The Wissahickon group landed on June 24, 1694, under the leadership of Johannes Kelpius (1673–1708), a gentleman and scholar. They expected momentarily the Second Coming, which Zimmerman had calculated should occur in 1694; so they set watchers to searching the skies all night with a telescope. This practice was soon abandoned. The early death of Kelpius, at the age of 35, deprived the community of its first Magister. Johann Gottfried Selig (1668–1745) succeeded him, but soon resigned in favor of Conrad Matthai (?–1748). Selig (or Seelig) lived his last years as a hermit in a cabin on the estate of William Levering; his death at the age of seventy-seven was recorded in the Levering family Bible. It is said that he bade them throw his divining staff into the Wissahickon after his death; when they did so, it exploded with a loud report. In the library of a hundred and fifty volumes that he left, in four languages, were ten by Jacob Böhme. Matthai was apparently the last Magister of the community, which gradually disintegrated and vanished, leaving no trace but its books, instruments, and traditions.

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